DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 801 CG 026 375

AUTHOR Bush, Maribeth
TITLE Transracial Adoption: Factors Promoting Racial Identity and Self-Esteem.
PUB DATE [May 95]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adopted Children; Adoptive Parents; Black Attitudes; Child Welfare; *Cross Cultural Training; Cultural Background; Cultural Differences; *Ethnicity; *Ethnic Relations; *Racial Identification; Racial Segregation; Self Esteem; Social Services; *Transracial Adoption

ABSTRACT

Transracial adoptions continue to occur in the United States, despite a long-running debate over the effects on the self-esteem and racial identity of adoptees. It is important for counselors to understand the needs of transracial adoptees in order to support such individuals in the process of identity development. A review of the literature was conducted to determine factors fostering healthy racial identity and self-esteem in transracial adoptees. The results of the review showed that the factors that tend to promote racial identity and self-esteem in adoptees include: living in a multiethnic community, attending desegregated schools, having adoptive parents with a strong acceptance of the child's ethnic heritage, and regular exposure to individuals sharing the child's ethnic background. Research shows that transracial adoptions can be successful in meeting the needs of transracial adoptees if the right conditions are present. Most available research on transracial adoption has been conducted in metropolitan areas. The status of transracial adoptions in primarily rural, white communities is still unknown and needs to be addressed before formal recommendations are proposed and implemented. (Author/KW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Running head: TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

ED 385 801

Transracial Adoption:

Factors Promoting Racial Identity and Self-Esteem

Maribeth Bush

University of Southern Maine

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. BUSH

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG026375

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

Transracial adoptions continue to occur in the United States, despite a long-running debate over the effects on the self-esteem and racial identity of adoptees. It is important for counselors to understand the needs of transracial adoptees in order to support such individuals in their process of identity development. A review of the literature was conducted to determine factors fostering healthy racial identity and self-esteem in transracial adoptees. The results of the review showed that the factors that tend to promote racial identity and self-esteem in adoptees include: living in a multiethnic community, attending desegregated schools, having adoptive parents with a strong acceptance of the child's ethnic heritage, and regular exposure to individuals sharing the child's ethnic background.

Transracial Adoption:

Factors Promoting Racial Identity and Self-Esteem

How transracial adoption effects adoptees is not a new concern in the United States. After the number of transracial adoptions peaked in the 1960's (Kallgren & Caudil, 1993; Johnson, Shireman, & Watson, 1987), the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) took a position that black children should be placed with only black families (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1972). The NABSW stated that transracial adoptees would be at risk for developing a poor racial identity and self-concept due to insufficient contact with others of their race. They also argued that transracial adoptees would not develop adequate skills for dealing with racism, and would not develop the ability to interact with their own race. The NABSW's stand against transracial adoptions put a virtual halt to such placements. However, the lack of minority families willing to adopt, the increase of minority children in foster homes, and the increased interest in international placements has created a gradual rise in the number of transracial adoptions occurring in the United States (Kallgren & Caudil, 1993; Johnson et al., 1987).

The NABSW argues that black children raised by white families will suffer poor racial identities because these children have no racially similar role models to relate to and identify with (Kallgren & Caudil, 1993; Johnson et al., 1987). The other side of this controversy argues that denying minority children the security of loving, adoptive parents because they do not share the same race is as equally, if not more harmful to the self-concept of the adoptees (Kallgren & Caudil, 1993; Johnson et al., 1987). The debate over transracial adoptions pivots around the issues of racial identity and self-esteem, and how these will manifest in adoptees without racially

similar role models and support systems (Kallgren & Caudil, 1993; Johnson et al., 1987).

Current research (McRoy et al., 1982; McRoy et al., 1984; Zuñiga, 1991; Kallgren & Caudil, 1993, Johnson et al., 1987) indicates specific factors tending to promote racial identity and self-esteem in transracial adoptees. These factors include living in multiethnic communities, attending desegregated schools, having adoptive parents with a strong acceptance of the child's ethnic heritage, and regular exposure to individuals sharing the child's ethnic background. Statistics (Naor, 1992; Naor; 1993) imply transracial adoptions occur in rural, white communities like Maine, as well as metropolitan areas (Grow & Shapiro, 1974; Kallgren & Caudil, 1993), regardless of racial support systems or role models.

It is hard to imagine what the identity formation process is like for the increasing number of transracial adoptees living in rural, white communities like Maine. It is important for clinical counselors and school counselors to understand the needs of transracial adoptees in order to support such individuals in their process of identity development. An increased awareness of these factors may help counselors provide more appropriate support for transracial adoptees, especially in predominantly white, rural communities deficient in racial diversity. Counselors could also use such information to educate parents, schools, and communities about factors that tend to promote self-esteem and racial identity in adoptees in communities lacking such elements. The purpose of this paper is to assess factors fostering healthy racial identity and self-esteem in transracial adoptees. A review of previous transracial adoption studies was conducted to isolate these factors.

Review of the Literature

Early Studies: 1970's

A 12 year study (Simon & Alstein, 1992) beginning in 1972 tracked 386 children of 204 transracially adoptive white families. The study included 42 white adoptees, 120 black adoptees, 37 Native American adoptees, and 167 white children born to the family. Parents and the children were interviewed in 1972, 1979, and Fall 1983/Winter 1984. Findings indicated that there are no self-esteem, racial awareness, and racial identity differences between transracial and inracial adoptees.

Another study (Grow & Shapiro, 1974) included 61 girls and 64 boys with a median age of 8.8 years who were in their adoptive homes a median of 7.2 years. The sample of transracial adoptees was selected voluntarily through adoption agencies from the following areas: Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Los Angeles, Montreal, and Seattle. The relative success of these adoptions was assessed by a set of 15 measures that included test scores, teacher evaluations, interviewer ratings, and indices developed from different types of data supplied by parents. The scores on these measures were combined in a single score to measure overall success. The majority of the adoptions, 77%, were considered a success. Only two significant relationships were found to occur between the summary score and variables describing the family and child. Children perceived by their parents as obviously black were more likely to have higher summary scores than those whose blackness was perceived as not obvious. Children in the largest family units (five or more children) were also likely to have higher scores than those in smaller units.

Later Studies: 1980's

Ruth McRoy, in a book she co-authored in 1974 (McRoy & McRoy, 1974), stated: "In the unnatural circumstances of a black child being raised in a white home, the black child, sensing his dissimilarity to his adoptive family, may develop a sense of low self-esteem and perhaps even self-hatred" (p. 52); she concluded that adoption agencies should locate black families for black children and to "immediately cease" (p. 65) the practice of placing black children in white homes. Less than a decade later, McRoy helped conduct two studies whose findings refuted her original stand against transracial adoption.

In one study (McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982), a sample of two groups of families was selected to participate: a group of thirty white families who had adopted black children, and a group of thirty black families who had adopted black children. To qualify for participation in this study, each family had to have a black adopted child who was at least 10 years of age and who had to have been in the adoptive home for at least one year, at least one of the child's birth parents had to have been black, and both members of the adoptive couple had to be of the same race. The major dependent variable was the self-esteem of the black adopted child. Self-esteem was operationally defined as the Total Positive Overall Level of Self-Esteem Score on the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale. No significant difference was found in the self-esteem of the two groups. All sixty black children, regardless of adoptive setting, were almost identical in their reports of self-worth as measured by the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale.

The children and families in this study (McRoy et al., 1982) were extensively interviewed using open-ended questions to gather additional data on how families were handling issues of racial identity with their adopted children. Opportunities for developing positive relationships

with blacks on an ongoing basis seemed to be a major factor in children who reported a positive racial identity and positive feelings toward other blacks. Transracially adopted black children who attended racially integrated schools, whose families resided in racially integrated communities, and whose families accepted their child's black racial identity tended to feel positive about themselves as black persons. Although there was no significant difference in overall self-esteem between the sampled transracially and inracially adopted children or the general population, racial identity was more of a problem for the black children being raised by white families. McRoy and her co-researchers concluded that factors such as the family's nurturance of the child's black identity; the child's access to black role models and peers in the community and in the school; and the parents' attention to the child's black heritage seemed to be influential in the shaping of a positive racial identity.

In another study (McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1984), thirty transracial families were interviewed. The families in this study had to have adopted a minimum of one child with at least one black birth parent, and the children had to be at least 10 years old. At the time of the study, all of the children had been in their adoptive homes for at least two years and all of the adoptions had become final. A questionnaire was developed for the adoptive parents and the black children. Results of the racial identity portion of the questionnaire showed that 16 (53%) of the adoptees in the sample referred to themselves as being either "mixed," "part white," or "black/white." Nine (10%) stated that their racial background was "white," and one responded "Mexican." One adoptee indicated that race was unimportant and referred to his background as "American." The questionnaire responses of the white adoptive parents showed that eighteen (60%) of the families took a "color blind" attitude to racial differences between the child and

family. Racial differences were not frequently discussed in the home. In the community, these black children were generally viewed as being "culturally different from" and "better than" other blacks. The children felt that they had little in common with blacks and expressed no desire to associate with them. Children with families in this category who had reached dating age usually dated whites. A second group of six families (20%) acknowledged the child's racial identity and the need to provide black role models for the child. Their children expressed an interest in contact with other blacks and often discussed racial identity issues with their parents and peers. However, a third group of six families (20%) was different from the first two in several ways. These families were likely to have adopted several black children and acknowledged that their family was no longer white but transracial. They enrolled their children in integrated schools. Racial discussions in the home and with peers were common. The children were taught to emphasize their black racial heritage. The children tended to have both black and white friends and to feel equally accepted by both groups. In addition, their parents tended to have frequent social contacts with blacks, and the children were exposed to numerous black role models. Similar to the 1982 study, the findings of this study implied that transracial adoptees who are raised by parents supporting a transracial family, social, and community lifestyle are more likely to feel comfortable with their racial identity, and are more likely to have multiethnic groups of friends.

A longitudinal study (Johnson et al., 1987) was conducted using a sample of 42 transracial placements and 45 inracial placements. All of the children were under three years old when placed in their adoptive homes, and most were under one. The families were interviewed shortly after the placement, when the children were four, and when the children were eight. About three-quarters of the transracially adopted children were judged to be "doing well"; to enjoy close

relationships with their parents, brothers, and sisters; to have friends; and to be relatively free of symptoms of emotional distress. Nine transracially adopted children were identified as having "some problems." Four of these were characterized as aggressive and insecure, with problems both in the home and in school; three were seen as having learning disabilities; and two had chronic health problems that were felt to contribute to behavioral difficulties. Although they had little contact with black people in their immediate neighborhoods, about a third of these parents reported maintaining some social contact with blacks. The children also had black friends; 46% named a black child among their best friends. In addition to the individual interview, the Clark Doll Test and Clark and Morland Picture Interview were used to help assess the children's racial preferences. At age four on the Clark Doll Test, 71% of the transracially adopted children and 53% of the inracially adopted children identified themselves as black. At age eight the two groups were almost identical, with 19 (73%) of the transracially adopted children and 21 (80%) of the inracially adopted children identifying themselves as black. Attitudes of parents toward the race of their children also were explored. Eleven of the transracial adoptive parents indicated a wish for their child to identify with the black race; nine of their children (82%) expressed a black identity. The remaining transracial parents wanted their children to identify with the white race, the human race, or neither race. Seven of their children (50%) expressed a black identity. This study concluded that transracially adopted children are being brought up in white communities, and though they have intellectual knowledge of their black cultural heritage, they have little contact with black people. The various measures in this study confirm that the transracially adopted child maintains a satisfactory adjustment through the grade school years, fully performing the developmental tasks of this age. McRoy and her co-researchers found that children in

transracial homes initially displayed a greater black preference than did children with black parents. They stated that this may reflect the initial importance that the transracial adopters attached to their child's race and their sincere efforts to support and develop that identity. However, they also found that as a child became assimilated into a transracial adoptive family, the racial factor became less important to the family; the family no longer thought of the child as different or black and the child's sense of racial identity stopped growing, while that of the child in a black family did not. Therefore, this study concluded that racial awareness and support needs to continue throughout the child's development in order for transracial adoptees to develop a positive racial identity.

A Study of Adoption Agencies

A recent study (Kallgren & Caudil, 1993) evaluated seven agencies in four major metropolitan areas to determine if their transracial adoption programs included placing children at an early age and evaluating and educating parents on issues of racial awareness as has been recommended by previous researchers. The agencies education and evaluation programs were rated using seven questions related to the key factors identified in previous research for the formation of healthy racial identity by transracial adoptees. The two public agencies surveyed were the only ones which did not place children transracially. Eighty six percent placed black and biracial children transracially. Seventy one percent also were involved in an adoption program for foreign-born children. Five of the seven agencies generally placed a minority child in a white home before the child's first birthday. All but one agency evaluated prospective transracial adopters on their ability to accept and live with racial differences. All of the agencies counseled prospective transracial adopters about community reactions and their child's racial identity. A

majority of agencies studied did not provide adequate resources or support systems for transracially adoptive parents. Only two agencies provided racial awareness training programs and a wide range of literature covering key transracial adoption issues. Only two agencies responded that there was a support group for parents of foreign-born children, and only one agency indicated the existence of a support group for parents of children of all ethnicities.

Discussion

A review of the literature found the racial attitude of the entire adoptive family toward the adoptee, the age of the child at time of placement, and the racial milieu in which the child will be raised are the three primary factors in determining a positive racial identity for a transracially adopted child. Based on these findings, it has been recommended (McRoy et al., 1982; Zuñiga, 1991; Kallgren & Caudil, 1993) that agencies place children in adoptive homes at an early age, utilize specific criteria in selecting tranracial adoptive families, and investigate the total racial environment in which the child will be raised. It also is recommended that adoption agencies encourage transracially adoptive families to live in racially diverse neighborhoods and to send their children to desegregated schools. Finally, it is recommended that adoption agencies address adopters' needs by distributing current transracial adoption literature, organize support groups, and offer postadoption consultation in order to help parents promote a positive and clear racial identity in the child. If these criteria are met, studies show that transracial adoptees have a good chance of developing a positive racial identity.

These recommendations have a number of implications for rural, white communities like Maine. According to the Maine State Department of Human Services (Naor, 1992; Naor, 1993), of the 548 adoptees for whom race was known in 1991, 11.5% were black or other non-white

races; of the 534 adoptees for whom race was known in 1992, 11% were black or other non-white race. Although these numbers do not specifically identify transracial adoptees, Maine's predominantly white population suggests that the majority of these adoptions were transracial. These statistics also imply that a large number of adoptive parents in Maine are willing and able to adopt transracially. Although the statistics are sparse and incomplete, it is clear transracial adoptions are occurring in Maine. Adoption agencies could, without much difficulty, encourage the placement of children at an early age, organize support groups, provide transracial adoption literature, and offer postadoption consultation in communities like Maine.

The missing elements, then, are the availability of culturally diverse schools and neighborhoods in rural, white communities. At this point, two directions could be taken. One is to recommend that transracial adoptions not occur in rural, white communities like Maine. This option could encourage transracial adoptive families to live in multicultural communities. However, it also might discourage rather than encourage other ethnic minorities from choosing white, rural communities as their homes. This, in turn, might hinder the development of multicultural neighborhoods and schools, which could be key elements for the racial identity development of currently placed adoptees. The second route is to encourage transracial adoptions in rural, white communities, and encourage racial minorities to choose communities like Maine as their home. This could increase the level of racial diversity, understanding, and acceptance in neighborhoods and schools. This also might help both current and future transracial adoptees develop a healthy racial identity, and might help cultivate a multicultural richness and appreciation in communities like Maine.

Most of the available research on transracial adoption has been conducted in metropolitan

areas. It is clear that the status of transracial adoptions in primarily rural, white communities is still unknown and needs to be addressed, including the number of currently finalized transracial adoptions, the primary regions of transracial placements, the screening process, and the pre- and post-adoption education that adoption agencies provide. The research shows that transracial adoptions can be successful in meeting the needs of transracial adoptees if the right conditions are present. Although the needs of transracial adoptees are clear, what rural white communities like Maine are doing to meet those needs is still vague and should be thoroughly studied before formal recommendations are proposed and implemented.

References

Adoption Task Force, (1989). Survey report. Augusta, Maine: Maine Department of Human Services.

Crain, W. (1992). Erickson and the eight stages of life. Theories of development concepts and application (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Grow, L.J. & Shapiro, D. (1974). Black children - white parents: A study of transracial adoption. Child Welfare League of America, Inc.

Hayes, P. (1993). Transracial adoption: Politics and ideology. Child Welfare, 72(3), 301-310.

Johnson, P. R., Shireman, J. F., & Watson, K. W. (1987). Transracial adoption and the development of black identity at age eight. Child Welfare, 66, 45-55.

Kallgren, C. A., & Caudil, P. J. (1993). Current transracial adoption practices: Racial dissonance or racial awareness. Psychological Reports, 72(2), 551-558.

McRoy, R. G. & McRoy, M. L., (1974). Black homes for black children. Lawrence, Kansas: Authors' Forum.

McRoy, R. G., Zurcher, L. A., & Lauderdale, M. L. (1982). Self-esteem and racial identity in transracial and inracial adoptees. Social Work, 27, 522-6.

McRoy, R. G., Zurcher, L. A., Lauderdale, M. L., & Anderson, R. N. (1984). The identity of transracial adoptees. Social Casework, 65, 34-39.

Naor, E., (1992). Adoptions in Maine, 1990. Augusta, Maine: Department of Human Services: Augusta, Maine.

Naor, E., (1993). Adoptions in Maine, 1991. Augusta, Maine: Maine Department of Human Services.

Simon, R. J., & Alstein, H., (1992). Adoption, race, and identity: From identity through adolescence. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers.

Zuñiga, M. E. (1991). Transracial adoption: Educating the parents. Journal of Multicultural Social Work, 1(2), 17-30.